

SPCA's 'cooperative tone' praised by supervisors

Animal shelter

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In a somewhat baffling display Tuesday, county supervisors praised the SPCA's new "cooperative tone" even while the agency disputed the amount of money the county says it owes area governments.

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The supervisors asked staff to return in March with suggestions on how to go after the \$779,400 in public money the county auditor maintains the SPCA misspent over the past three years.

The SPCA agrees with just \$221,000 of that figure. That's what it owes in fees and fines it failed to hand over to local jurisdictions. The SPCA has been paying off that sum in monthly \$5,000 payments since September. On Tuesday, county auditor Gary Knutson urged

supervisors to go after the entire sum "vigorously and immediately."

The county maintains the SPCA violated its contract provisions when it spent an additional \$551,000 in taxpayer money. The county and the cities of Scotts Valley, Capitola and Santa Cruz signed a three-year, \$1.5 million contract with the SPCA in 1999.

SPCA board treasurer Kate Hochhaus disagreed, saying "every dollar was spent appropriately."

The SPCA said it would increase its monthly payment to \$9,000 to make a bigger dent in its \$221,000 debt.

Meanwhile on Tuesday, for the first time since the accounting fiasco was discovered, the agency expressed a note of atonement.

"We apologize for the SPCA's financial oversights ... and recognize the

inconvenience these may have caused," Hochhaus said.

Supervisor Ellen Pirie said she hoped such sentiment opens "a new chapter in your relationship."

Gary Supervisor Tony Campos expressed harsh words, saying the county has to go after owed money "all the way ... and get this back to the taxpayers."

Campos asked how many members reneged on the SPCA board. Hochhaus answered three.

He then asked whether the agency's bylaws require a minimum number of board members. Hochhaus answered no.

"I can see why we got into trouble. Campos said, patting their shaming his head. "Never mind. I might say something I shouldn't."

The county and SPCA first butted heads nearly a year ago, when the SPCA said it would need double the money it was getting to continue providing services.

Unable to reach a compromise, the county and area cities formed a public agency that took over animal services in August. After housing animals in boarding kennels for months, the Animal Services Authority opened an interim shelter in Scotts Valley in December.

The SPCA, low on donations, closed its shelter the same month. It is still providing humane education and other programs, and hopes to eventually operate a small, no-kill shelter similar to the San Francisco SPCA.

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